Dear Secretary Salazar:

Protect Otero Mesa Now!

Nearly 1500 residents of southern New Mexico and west Texas have signed the following letter asking Interior Secretary Ken Salazar to take immediate action to protect Otero Mesa - one of the largest and wildest desert grasslands in North America.

Dear Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar,

We would like to express our full support for the permanent protection of Otero Mesa, a landscape that is rich in cultural and natural significance in southern New Mexico that is threatened by oil and gas development.

Otero Mesa is a national treasure, containing one of the largest remaining grasslands in the Chihuahuan Desert. This unique landscape provides vital habitat for many species, including pronghorn, mule deer, mountain lions, prairie dogs, and hundreds of desert birds, and more than 200 other bird species.

Otero Mesa also sits atop one of New Mexico’s largest untapped sources of fresh water—the Salt Basin aquifer—which contains as much as 4.5 billion gallons of probable groundwater, according to a U.S. Geological Survey report. This aquifer will be at serious risk if contamination by oil and gas development is allowed to proceed.

Otero Mesa has long been an important place for Native Americans, used for traditional hunting and gathering, as well as sacred ceremonies and dances. It was the location for a Butterfield Stage Station. The oases of the Butterfield Trail are still visible on the ground.

Finally, Otero Mesa’s public lands provide outstanding opportunities for the people of this region to engage in hiking, hunting and other types of outdoor recreation.

The extraordinary values of Otero Mesa have been recognized by many elected officials and community leaders who have called for its permanent protection, including New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, numerous state legislators, city councils, county commissions, religious and tribal leaders, scientists, sportmen, business owners and conservationists.

We applaud the recent decision by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals rejecting the Bureau of Land Management’s appeal to strip Otero Mesa of its designation as a national monument, allowing the agency instead to consider various options for industrial development, including a no-drill alternative “to protect environmental values.”

We the undersigned urge you to take immediate action to see Otero Mesa protected, now and for the future. We invite you to visit Otero Mesa and to experience the wild beauty of this desolate landscape and to work with us on a plan for its permanent protection.

Sponsored by the Southwest Environmental Center

For more information, go to www.wildmesquite.org.

Photo by: Joe Adair